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ABSTRACT

This essay presents a list of 11 qualities that outstanding teachers possess, including: (1) flexibility (being able to change plans at a moment's notice and make adjustments accordingly); (2) enthusiasm and energy (showing a drive to excite students and model positive behavior); (3) empathy (acting understanding and compassionate of parents as well as students); (4) knowledge of content (learning continually and keeping current in the field); (5) humor (being able to laugh at oneself and divert potentially difficult situations); (6) tolerance (valuing all people, regardless of race, socioeconomic status, religion, or sex); (7) advocacy (mentoring both parents and students); (8) curiosity/risk taking (being willing to try new approaches and setting an example for students to go above and beyond the assignment); (9) defiant determination (never giving up on a student); (10) creativity (being able to make something out of nothing on a small budget and inventing creative ideas for lessons to capture all students); and (11) forming relationships with students (gaining their trust and respect). (SM)

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Celebrating Teachers.

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Celebrating Teachers

This essay is a celebration of the amazing teachers and future teachers that I have had the privilege to know on a daily basis for the past twelve years. As a middle school teacher for six years and now a teacher of teachers for six years, I have seen many students and many teachers. Most are truly amazing people who do astonishing things. After observing many teachers, I have made a list of ten plus one qualities I believe these outstanding teachers possess.

In the next decade we are going to need between 3.5 and 4 million new teachers. As the baby boomers retire, they will be replaced by younger and inexperience teachers. Will these younger teachers be able to fill the gap? My belief is that not only will they fill the gap, they will also make major changes in the field of education. These new teachers are going into the profession better educated, have more experience with students, and are truly ready to take the baton and run. Why do I feel this way? Because everyday I witness students who possess the qualities I have observed in the outstanding teachers.

1. Flexibility

   Being able to change your plans at a moment's notice is truly an art. Teachers spend a tremendous amount of time writing out lesson plans, making handouts, gathering materials, making accommodations and modifications, planning down to the minute. But I don't remember more than a few days in my teaching career that the plan actually worked. Something always interfered with my best intentions. A visitor stopped by, someone had a better idea, someone was ill, or an unplanned event sneaked into the schedule, just to name a few. But that's life. Teachers make the adjustments and move on. Many people can't do that. A teacher must be able to move from one situation to another with ease and make certain students do not get lost in the shuffle.

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2. Enthusiasm and energy

   There are many ways to demonstrate this skill. Some teachers seem hyperactive. They get up in the morning and rush from one thing to another, going all day and all night, accomplishing many feats. Others are more focused but seem to gather students along the way, enticing and exciting them to follow the learning path. Even when teachers are sick, they seem to have this drive and a need to model positive behavior for students.

3. Empathy

   Teachers are understanding and compassionate of parents/guardians as well as students. Empathy for a person leaves the person with self-esteem and dignity in tact. Sympathy takes it away. Good teachers know the difference.

4. Knowledge of content

   A good teacher goes beyond knowing the content. Good teachers learn continually and keep current in their fields. Good teachers also attend in-services, workshops, conferences, and take classes to remain current. This takes time, money, and energy.

5. Humor

   Teachers must possess a healthy sense of humor. Laughing is a wonderful way to relieve tension. A teacher who is able to laugh at herself can divert potentially difficult situations. Often tough situations can be de-escalated with humor. Often teachers face situations in which they want to cry, but laughter can relieve the tension. Teachers and students can do and say the funniest things. We should all keep journals of these things.

6. Tolerance

   As teachers, we witness all types of diversity. We must be tolerant of all people, regardless of race, socioeconomic status, religion or sex. We need to set the example of tolerance and provide all students with an equal opportunity to receive the greatest gift of all, an education.

7. Being an advocate

   Many students and parents do not have a mentor to provide them with guidance. The teachers I have observed have many resources at their fingertips to offer assistance in many different areas. Many parents of students with special needs and the students themselves do not know the IEP process, the educational lingo, or their rights; it's our job to advocate for them.

8. Curious/Risk Takers

   Many students do not want to upset the status quo or take risks. When teachers try new approaches, they are setting an example and modeling for students. Curiosity can challenge students to go beyond and above the assignment. Risk-taking can prepare students for challenges in life and provides opportunities for creative thinking.

9. Defiant determination

   Often we want to give up on a student because there seems no way to assist them. We think we have exhausted all alternatives. We might take a rest, but successful teachers never give up. There must be someone, something, some agency, some stone we have not looked under, but we will succeed. In a quality teacher's classroom, no student will go without support or encouragement.

10. Creative

    Teacher's budgets are usually quite small. But one would never know this most of the time. Teachers can make something out of nothing and make one think it's worth a million dollars. They can invent the most outrageous ideas for lessons that capture all students. They are clever with their hands, their ideas, their time, materials, students, parents, assistants, grading, lessons, and their classroom environment. You name it, and they change it before your eyes. And, if one teacher can't think of some way to make it happen, believe me, several teachers can.

Plus One

> Of course the *most important quality is the ability to form relationships with students.* That means gaining their *trust* and *respect* and without this teachers cannot be effective.

The goal of this essay is to celebrate, praise, and inspire future teachers. Frequently new teachers do not realize their potential. Teachers of the future are so important. With the mass of teachers retiring in the next decade, new teachers are our hope for the future. We must stop the negative talk about students and teachers, and focus on the strengths and potential of both teachers and students. There are many unique students and potentially great teachers; we need to celebrate their gifts.

With the current focus on standards and accountability, we must remember to prominently carry the banner of "students first," and to keep focused on the positive strengths and commitment of those who chose this career to "make a difference." As Susan Ohanian so richly writes, "The best thing we teachers have to take to our students is ourselves, who we are as people....the best we have to take to our students looks back at us from the mirror every morning. "Also Parker Palmer in *The Courage to Teach* shares that teachers who make a difference are teacher who "teach who they are."

I see the diverse strengths of our new teachers entering the field, and they already know that what will be important in the future will be differences rather than similarities. As Robert Frost once remarked in a letter to poet, Louis Untermeyer, "in art, as in nature, we want all the differences we can get. In society too." And we must add "in schools" also. The teachers of the future are diverse and special, and their uniqueness needs to be celebrated.

Ohanian, Susan (1999) One Size Fits Few. Portsmouth, N.H.: Heinemann.

Palmer, Parker (1998) The Courage to Teach, San Francisco: Jossey Bass.